

PINK-FOOTED AND GREYLAG GEESE IN BRITAIN, NOVEMBER 1988

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Introduction

The 29th annual autumn census of Pink-footed *Anser brachyrhynchus* and Greylag Geese *A. anser* in Britain took place over the weekend of 12th/13th November 1988. As usual, morning or evening flight counts were undertaken by the regular volunteer observers of the National Wildfowl Counts, supplemented by additional counters and a survey of east central Scotland by M.A.Ogilvie. Selected observers carried out sample age counts to ascertain the proportion of young in the flocks.

Weather and conditions

On 13th, when most counts were done, conditions were excellent apart from some rain in the far north. The previous evening the weather was bad, with rain and poor visibility in many areas, and this may have caused undercounting at some places. Feeding conditions varied considerably between regions, the harvest having been early and clean in north-east and south-east Scotland, with prompt ploughing in of stubbles, but much later in east central areas.

PINKFEET

Despite another successful breeding season in 1988 - with 23.5% juveniles in the November samples - the count total showed only a slight increase, from 172,000 to 176,000 (Table 1). (Mean brood size was 3.19 - n = 272.) Annual adult mortality is estimated at 15% from ringing and count data, and the autumn 1988 population would be expected to be about 200,000 based on the figure of 172,000 in 1987. It appears, therefore, that a significant number of Pinkfeet were missed in the counts. As mentioned earlier there may have been undercounting on 12th due to poor weather, but it may also be that with an increasing population they are becoming harder to find; new resorts may have been adopted which have not yet been located. It is also possible that birds may have stayed longer in Iceland in the mild autumn of 1988; the feasibility of census work in Iceland is being investigated (see also under Greylags).

For the second year running east central Scotland held roughly half the total count (Table 2), with 22,000 at Montrose Basin (Tayside) and 7,000 at Cameron Reservoir (Fife). A lower than normal proportion were found in south-east Scotland (Lothian and Borders), perhaps partly because the early ploughing in of the stubbles caused the birds to move on sooner than usual. As early as October 8th West Water Reservoir held an amazing concentration of 40,000 (the largest count ever made at a single resort), but "only" 13,700 remained there the following day and 10,900 in mid-November. The likely destination of many of these birds was Lancashire, which held record autumn numbers: 16,500 in October and 27,400 in November, the latter amounting to 16% of the total British count. There was also an unusually high count for autumn of 5,000 on the east shore of the Wash. Elsewhere the largest concentrations were 22,400 at the Loch of Strathbeg (Banff & Buchan), 13,700 at Dupplin Lochs (Perth), 13,000 at Loch Leven (Kinross) and 10,500 at Carsebreck Lochs (Perth).

Table 1. Nos of Pinkfeet and Greylags counted in Britain, November 1986-1988

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1988	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1988
Orkney	-	-	-	380	1300	990
Highland						
Caithness	-	-	3	5880	3340	1260
Ross & Cromarty	20	30	330	6360	12400	8160
Inverness	-	-	-	5890	11000	10150
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	1240	1720	190
Grampian						
Moray	-	-	80	8000	9950	10400
Banff & Buchan	15510	11500	22400	6600	7350	7900
Gordon	9630	8840	2010	6160	8410	11960
Kincardine & Dee	-	-	-	8200	8100	18250
Tayside						
Angus	21800	53730	35920	4270	6280	6870
Perth & Kinross	24800	31720	41110	24530	13150	15130
Central	1190	-	6530	640	260	120
Fife	5500	6050	7080	2050	100	-
Lothian						
West	20	140	-	860	700	-
Mid	6680	4000	110	700	740	170
East	5410	11350	7420	1220	30	810
Borders						
Tweeddale	16300	10430	10880	120	110	300
Roxburgh	4140	4000	3720	4450	470	490
Berwickshire	5530	5000	2470	1600	3080	2940
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	-	-	-	2520	3030	1710
Cunningham	-	-	-	130	190	160
Dunbarton	-	-	-	500	350	600
Strathkelvin	-	-	-	870	650	800
Lanark	410	3490	1200	290	690	-
Kyle & Carrick	-	-	-	160	200	-
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	-	-	-	3620	2160	100
Stewartry	-	50	2	580	1250	900
Nithsdale	80	1800	1000	240	1150	400
Cumbria	55	200	-	1000	810	180
Lancashire	16560	16460	27390	-	-	200
Northumberland	3	32	80	2940	5820	7580
Humberside	-	70	-	-	-	-
Lincolnshire	120	17	6	-	-	-
Norfolk	2000	3000	6400	-	-	-
TOTALS	135720	171980	176210	107000	104790	108700

115,311?

GREYLAGS

The total of 109,000 is only slightly above the 1987 figure, which itself was considered a considerable underestimate. With a similar proportion of juveniles in the flocks to the Pinkfeet - 22.5% - and the same estimate of annual adult mortality (15%) this is also a much smaller increase than would be expected, and suggests a particularly serious underrecording of this species. There are several possible, and partly conflicting, reasons for this. Greylags have a more lowland distribution in Iceland than Pinkfeet and they are more likely to stay there through the autumn. On the other hand there is, as with the Pinkfeet, evidence that many birds moved south through Britain earlier than normal this autumn. Nearly 5,000 were found in one area of Caithness in early October, yet only 1,300 remained in mid-November. Loch Eye, Ross & Cromarty, held 19,300 Greylags on 28th October, but only 3,700 remained in mid-November. In Grampian, the mid-Deeside roosts held a record 25,300 on 7th November, with 18,150 still present on the count weekend a few days later.

The south of Scotland apparently held fewer than normal in November (Table 2), but over 7,500 were found in Northumberland. Other large gatherings were at Spynie Loch, Moray (8,300) and the Loch of Skene, Gordon (9,000).

A further factor possibly resulting in greater under-recording of Greylags than Pinkfeet is that they are less predictable in their roosting areas. There must also be a possibility of wild birds being overlooked in areas where feral populations are established, such as North Yorkshire, but since the feral populations are themselves expanding rapidly, at c.13% per annum (Owen & Salmon 1988), this would be very hard to show. In Dumfries & Galloway, the only area where both feral and Icelandic Greylags are known to occur in substantial numbers, 1,470 birds were found in surveys in June and September 1988 (Shimmings et al. 1988). The 1988 totals in Table 1 for this area probably mainly involve wintering birds: the Stranraer area, the main centre of the feral population was not covered, while the September numbers at other sites were much lower.

The mean brood size in the autumn flocks was 2.29 (n = 221).

Table 2. Regional distribution of Pinkfeet and Greylags counted in November 1986-1988, expressed as percentages of total

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1988	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1988
North Scotland	18.6	11.8	14.1	47.8	60.7	63.7
East Central Scotland	39.3	53.2	51.5	30.9	18.9	20.3
South-east Scotland	28.1	20.3	14.0	8.8	4.9	4.3
South-west Scotland	0.4	3.2	1.3	9.7	10.0	4.5
North England	12.2	9.6	15.6	2.9	5.6	7.2
East England	1.6	1.8	3.6	-	-	-

Figures are percentages of total count.

News

A further 165 Pinkfeet have been ringed at Martin Mere so far this season, in two separate catches on 5th and 18th November. Four of these birds have already been recovered a considerable distance away: one shot in Lincolnshire in December, one at Port Allen on the Firth of Tay, also in December, and two (BFU & VDY) ringed together and resighted at Bankfoot near Perth in January. Further catches are planned before departure, so please look out for ringed birds. Recent population modelling has produced some intriguing results, including the suggestion of a link between spring weather in Iceland and breeding success of Pinkfeet and Greylags. An expedition is therefore planned to Iceland in late April/early May to locate the birds and study their behaviour.

The forms for the spring counts in Britain are enclosed with this report.

References

Owen, M. & Salmon, D.G. 1988. Feral Greylag Geese in Britain and Ireland, 1960-1986. *Bird Study* 35: 37-45.

Shimmings, P., Burn, J. & Owen, M. 1988. Survey of feral Greylag Geese in southwest Scotland 1988. Unpubl. rep. Wildfowl Trust to NCC.

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